

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-AWASHINGTON TIME
12 April 1985

'Coercive Utopians': Church groups bless Sandinista cause

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

American church groups, many of which have long histories of involvement in national politics, are turning their attention to Central America in increasing numbers.

And while some church groups remain dedicated almost exclusively to promoting church extension, evangelism and the protection of human rights throughout Central America, others have become more involved in the movement to oppose U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Now, many church groups share common goals, projects, ideology and membership with some leftist political organizations. As a result, they are tightly woven into "The Network" of organizations whose primary goal is to seek radical change in Reagan administration policies in Latin America.

"Church groups in general, and leaders of the Catholic Church in particular, have become the most vocal and persistent opponents of the administration's anti-communist strategy in Central America," the Wall Street Journal reported in a 1983 news report.

Commenting on this church opposition, a senior administration official was quoted in the Journal as saying, "It's the toughest nut we have to crack."

The number of church and religious-affiliated organizations involved in these activities has grown in recent years. Some intelligence experts say that as much as 50 percent of the left-wing Latin American "Network" effort comes from groups and organizations

manned, funded or coordinated by elements of some of the nation's major religious denominations.

And in many cases, they say, these groups are more radical, more active and much more heavily funded than their secular counterparts.

These church groups are "the

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most effective in lobbying ... because they wear a cloak of legitimacy," said Michael D. Boggs, former director of international affairs at the AFL-CIO.

"They get folks to write letters who don't have the faintest idea what they're talking about," Mr. Boggs was quoted as saying in a 1982 article in Congressional Quarterly.

"The churches are the most active group and the most influential group lobbying against U.S. policy [in Latin America], without any doubt," concurred Kerry Ptacek, research director for the independent Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD).

"I would say that the churches and their various executive groups were primarily responsible for the initial cutoff of aid to the Contras," he said.

Perhaps most infuriating to critics is that some churches have provided money, credibility and an audience to a host of other groups critical of U.S. policy, ranging from "human-rights" organizations — such as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) — to a network of organizations openly sympathetic to guerrilla movements in Latin America.

"So many left activists are linked up with church-groups that it's hard to know what is a real church group," IRD spokesman Penn Kemble said in the Congressional Quarterly story.

Few of the religious/political connections are overt but, in many cases, they are strong. And though some liberal churches maintain their own agenda, it bears strong resemblances to that pursued by many of their political counterparts.

One example of the tie-in between the church and political groups is the link between the National Council of Churches and the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA). According to a 1984 study by the conservative Heritage Foundation, much of the research used by those who oppose Reagan policy in Central America is derived from NACLA.

NACLA was established in the NCC's offices in Washington in 1966, and receives financial support from numerous Protestant churches through the NCC's Latin American Division and through specific projects such as the Presbyterian hunger program, according to an IRD report.

Other groups, such as the Washington Office on Latin America, also benefit from church funding.

WOLA's 1983 Annual Report, for instance, lists \$124,602 in contributions from religious organizations including the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.; the American Lutheran Church; St. Luke Presbyterian Church; American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.; Board of Global Ministries (United Methodist Church); Maryknoll Father and Brothers; Maryknoll Sisters; Jesuit Missions; World Council of Churches; the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.; the Episcopal Church, and others.

The IRD also has documented mainline Protestant church support for radical political movements in the United States and in other nations, including Vietnam.

"Direct NCC involvement with the governments and Communist Party structures of the Indochina region is intense, conscious and ongoing," IRD stated in a 1983 report titled, "A Time for Candor: Mainline Churches and Radical Social Witness."

The institute also has reported that the United Methodist Board funds the National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People, which was founded "to support and defend the Nicaraguan revolution," and other solidarity groups that assist the Salvadoran rebels.

"Support for the pro-Sandinista network in Nicaragua and the

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